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# Quit Your Kvetching: The Humor of Woody Allen

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# Quit Your Kvetching: The Humor of Woody Allen

## **Erratum**

Editor's note: Errata corrected as of 10.11.2011.

## Quit Your *Kvetching*: The Humor of Woody Allen

### Book Review | *Woody Allen: An Essay on the Nature of the Comical*

Alan Soble

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***Woody Allen: An Essay on the Nature of the Comical.* Vittorio Hösle; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007; x + 96 pages. (“Preface to the English Book Version,” “Notes,” “Index of Films by Woody Allen,” no other index, no bibliography.) \$18.00 paperback; 978-0-268-03104-6.**

§1. I don’t really know what Professor Hösle’s little book is about, what its main theses are, or what its author intended to accomplish. Never mind. I can barely make my way through an *Archie* comic, let alone figure out “Non Sequitur.”

That’s not quite true. Vittorio Hösle (hereafter, “VH”) tells us right away that, “the whole point” (not part of the point) “of my book is that Allen is a profoundly philosophical comedian” (p. x). In reply to this bold assertion, I wrote in the margin, using an extra fine green Pilot Precise V5 rolling ball pen (made in Japan), “Geeze, anyone who paid attention already knew this. Or is the emphasis here on *profoundly*?” The originality of VH’s book, then, lies in the thesis that Allen is not merely a run-of-the-mill philosophical comedian (as are, for example, Steve Martin, Rodney Dangerfield, and Gilbert Gottfried), but that he is a profoundly philosophical comedian (as are, says VH, Aristophanes and Molière). I have trouble measuring “profundity.” Further, about here I get lost, being largely, it seems, undereducated and hence

culturally illiterate, and not even a switch to a blue Pilot helps. In his “Index of Films by Woody Allen” (pp. 95-96), VH lists 41 movies (a connotatively neutral term, between the crude “flick” and the intellectually respectable “film,” which is why the contemporary mega-university doesn’t have a “Flick Studies” program). VH must have seen them all, because according to the Index all are discussed or mentioned somewhere in the book. I’m clearly Allen-challenged, for (*mea culpa*) I’ve seen only a dozen: *Annie Hall*\*, *Bananas*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*\*, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*\*, *Play It Again, Sam*, *Purple Rose of Cairo*, *Sleeper*, *Take the Money and Run*, *What’s New, Pussycat?*, *Zelig*, and *Antz*\* (asterisked films = my daughter Rachel and I own the DVD). True, I’ve seen some of them more than once, and I keep getting more out of each viewing. (The same applies to *Monsters, Inc.*) Nevertheless, the only scholar capable of reviewing this book is one who has seen all the Allen films listed by VH. Anything short of that (plus Aristophanes, Molière, Shakespeare, Arthur Miller, *et al.*) would be an injustice. Unperturbed, I plow forward, relying on the excuse that I would have viewed and perhaps purchased all 41 (or so) films if and only if I had been planning to write a book on Allen.

I soon realized that something else was not quite right about VH’s claim that Allen is a “profoundly philosophical comedian.” VH continues, in the Preface, with “my focus is on the philosophical dimensions of [Allen’s] jokes and comical situations” (p. x), which permits us to assume that by “comedian” VH means one who creates jokes and comical situations – as well as comedies (a film genre) that contain jokes and comic situations. But a few lines later, VH says that his “essay aims at being . . . an analysis of the unique features of Allen’s comical universe,” which apparently (if it means anything) expands VH’s territory beyond Allen the comedian and his jokes and comical situations and comedies. VH plans to take his readers on a magic carpet ride through a comic-cosmic universe, when most of them still haven’t seen the Liberty Bell or sat through a live performance of *Saturday Night Live*. All this talk of Allen being a “profoundly philosophical comedian,” however, is misleading. Two examples exhibit the equivocation. A few pages into the book (p. 7), VH lists three questions he addresses about Allen in the book. One is: “What makes some of his films philosophically so profound?” Maybe VH was economizing (in such a short book, saving one word?), but the question doesn’t assert that Allen’s *comedies* are philosophically profound. Instead, “some” of Allen’s films (which ones?) are philosophically profound. VH is not sticking to his “whole point.” The second example comes from the title of the penultimate section of the book, “The Great Philosophical Issues in Allen’s Movies” (p. 57). Our options are, first, to grant VH the freedom to omit a word (“comical,” before “movies”) to save space or, second, to insist on the equivocation. The first makes out VH and UND Press to be extraordinarily silly, in sacrificing accuracy to save an unnoticeable amount of space; the second strikes a hard blow at the coherence of VH’s book, his

“whole point” of the Preface to the book being denied by the book itself. Indeed, a close examination of this section of the book (pp. 57-84) doesn’t make the point that Allen the comic/comedian is profoundly philosophical, but that Allen *simpliciter* is. (Analytic philosophers of film and analytic film studies scholars will rebel at much of VH’s book, while the stereotypical continental metaphysician, the philosopher Allen himself satirizes and caricatures in his books and films, will feel right at home.) For example:

Mickey in *Hannah and Her Sisters* is saved from his suicidal intentions, connected with his incapacity to find out whether God really exists, by the Marx Brothers’ *Duck Soup*, which does not solve his theological problem but shows that it is not necessary to do so in order to enjoy life. [p. 79]

Overlook for now that VH has inaccurately interpreted what Mickey has figured out, “that it is not necessary to do so [to know whether God exists] in order to enjoy life” (p. 79). I’ll discuss this issue in §8. The point to be made here is that it is not Allen *qua* comic or comedian that has led us (along with the Woody persona Mickey) to this theological-philosophical position. The expression of this position is embedded in a film that is generally comedic, but nothing about Mickey’s doubts about the value of life in a godless universe was portrayed comically. The fact that Mickey might have answered the question for himself by accidentally running into *Duck Soup* at the right time doesn’t mean that Allen is a philosophical comedian. It means that he has the talent to broach philosophical matters in his films, but neither *qua* comic nor *qua* comedian, or at least not always and only.

There is another equivocation, one that I have displayed but have not yet explicitly brought attention to, between VH’s claim that Woody Allen is a “profoundly philosophical” comedian and his claim that Allen is a “philosophically profound” comedian. These descriptions are not equivalent. Because VH in his Preface uses the phrase “profoundly philosophical” when stating the “whole point” of his book, we should probably favor that attribution. “Philosophically profound” is strongly complimentary, putting Allen on the level of the great dead white male philosophers. “Profoundly philosophical” is more accurate, modest, and plausible. In this case, we are saying that Allen’s films are thickly philosophical – they contain philosophical allusions and raise philosophical questions – but are not committing ourselves to the thesis that his films handle philosophical matters in a profound way. Indeed, Allen’s films do not probe philosophical problems profoundly. As a student and purveyor of philosophy, Allen is at best a sophomore, at worst a Sophist. In *Purple Rose of Cairo*, Cecilia’s man Tom is perfect except that he’s fictional. That’s a cute allusion, and only a cute allusion, to St. Anselm’s and Descartes’s ontological argument for God’s existence (see VH, p. 73), for Allen goes no deeper than the allusion. Allen’s

philosophical superficiality is not altogether his fault. Film as a medium cannot be geared toward being philosophically profound. It can be only profoundly philosophical, as in VH's thesis. But that success is not very exciting. It's mundane. We are provoked more philosophically by, say, Allen's *Getting Even*, a work in the medium of printed prose, than we are by his work in the medium of film.

§2. If it is possible for a tiny book of exactly 87 small (6½" x 3.75") text pages to be about too many things (theories of humor and Woody Allen's films), this is that tiny book. If it is possible to write a 64% rambling and a 47% boring book about Woody Allen's films, this is that book. If it is possible to write about humor without cracking one single original joke or letting loose with some well-deserved ridiculing sarcasm (repeating Allen's jokes doesn't count), that challenging task has now been accomplished. The problem with God, infinity, consciousness, and this little book, is that they are all inherently inexplicable, like my psoriatic arthropathy. To make life worse, none of them are funny.

Another book on Woody Allen, a superb collection of fifteen essays gathered together in *Woody Allen and Philosophy: You Mean My Whole Fallacy is Wrong?*, was published in 2004, three years before VH's book.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to VH's humorlessness, the writer of the "Foreword" (Tom Morris), the editors (Mark Conard and someone called, improbably, and a joke unto itself, "Aeon Skoble"), and many of the contributing authors have a sense of humor and are not afraid to show it. In their "Introduction," the editors point out that some philosophers see Allen as an optimist while others see him as a pessimist, and conclude with the punch line, "philosophers disagreeing about interpretation of art – go figure" (p. 2). This is not an Allen-style quip, but cute nonetheless. All the biographical sketches of the contributors in the book's back matter ("All These Great Minds" [pp. 261-264]) end with a snappy line. For example, Jerold Abrams "buys art by the yard"; Per Broman wants "to be nominated to the Academy of the Overrated"; Sander Lee "will always choose God over the truth"; Mary Nichols "is astounded by people who want to know the universe when she finds it hard enough to find her way around Chinatown"; and James South "does not respond well to mellow." The inclusion of this humor, however, is misleading and, to my mind, is only two meters away from plagiarism. Readers not "in the know" about Allen's corpus will wrongly take these jokes to be original, each created by the two editors or the contributing authors.<sup>2</sup> Conard and Skoble might have assumed that only readers "in the know" would bother with the volume and believed that it would insult their intelligence to provide proper citations. Only Tom Morris's foreword successfully incorporates new Allen-style humor into the text: "This comedic genius isn't just a comic. He has made some thoroughly serious films as well, with no jokes whatsoever. These also tend to be the ones with no audiences whatsoever. But they are all very well done, and extremely powerful in their explorations of the human

condition” (p. ix). Nice, although on a good day (any one with no hurricane or bursting water pipes) I almost prefer my version: “This comedic genius isn’t just a comic. He has made some thoroughly serious films as well, with no jokes whatsoever. These films are very well done, are powerful explorations of the human condition, and make it easier to find a good seat.”<sup>3</sup>

Maybe, because I am a descendent of Romanian and Ukrainian Jewish shtetl dwellers, an American, and a former inhabitant of the Mid-West – that is, not a cosmopolitan, sophisticated European – I have overlooked the author’s subtle humor. The following passage might actually include a small gem (p. 39): “[M]isunderstandings are a popular source of comic effects” which “may be caused by homonyms and homophones (such as *Oedipus Wrecks/Oedipus Rex*). . . . Allen already dealt with this particular form of misunderstanding in one of his early texts (which, by the way, contain in germ many ideas of the later films).” Allen often plays a character who is obsessed with Nazis, Hitler, Germany, and the anti-Semitic epithet “Jew” in a quickly-spoken “did you” (*Annie Hall*). For my part, I have always sensed something sinister about the “Jew” in “juice,” regardless of its fruit of origin. (“Jumex,” a south-of-the-border brand, barely conceals its anti-Semitism.) This sensitivity, which I share with Allen, bewilders me when I come across VH’s juxtaposition “germ many” in the parenthetical clause above. Is this phrase a deliberate, playful amphibolous homonym, which displays precisely the Allen technique that VH is here discussing? “The texts contain in Germany [but not in Ethiopia] ideas of the later films.” To make the same point, VH could have written, instead, “contain the germs of many ideas,” which would have been funny in a different way, indeed, funnier than this one mild joke I am charitably granting to him. I struggled mightily to use VH’s phrase in another amphibolous homonym. The best I could come up with is this pair of sentences: “We should avoid this germ. Manic people have difficulty doing so” and “We should avoid this. Germanic people have difficulty doing so.” Note, before we leave this soon-to-be-run-on paragraph, that VH underestimates the knowledge of and insults his readers by inserting the obvious “*Oedipus Rex*” as Allen’s intended homophone of “*Oedipus Wrecks*.” By itself, “such as *Oedipus Wrecks*” would have done well enough in that sentence. I would be pedantically underestimating my readers were I to explain laboriously how “I am a descendent of Romanian and Ukrainian Jewish shtetl dwellers, an American, and a former inhabitant of the Mid-West” is nearly LOL amphibolous, saved by a mere comma.

§3. One reviewer of VH’s book chides him for ignoring Allen’s Jewishness:

We both laugh *with* Woody as he makes clever observations, and laugh *at* him for being a neurotic *schlemiel* (habitual bungler) and a *schlimazel* (born loser). I am inserting these terms here. Curiously, Hösle doesn’t make use of the rich

Yiddish comic vocabulary and doesn't connect Allen's comedy with traditional Jewish humor.<sup>4</sup>

It's not that VH never mentions Jews, Hebrews, or this feature of Allen's humor. He does, on a number of pages: 10, 17, 22, 42, 44, 50, 66, 68, 87. But there is no real engagement with these themes. For example, VH does not address a Jewish-style joke in *Annie Hall* (which joke VH knows well): Two elderly women are at a Catskill resort. One says, "The food at this place is really terrible." The other one replies, "I know; and such small portions." Were VH to engage "Jews in the *ars comica*," he would inevitably have to move beyond Allen to consider Lenny Bruce, Gilda Radner, Adam Sandler, Billy Crystal, Nora Ephron, Sarah Silverman, and novelist Philip Roth. Doing this would have taken VH beyond the scope of this tiny book, but it might have rounded out his understanding of Allen. In his notes, VH – the innocent tease? – mentions two other topics that he does not discuss. Why not? He tells us (p. 90, note 11) that there are "many connections between food and sex in Allen's movies," but he fails to provide even one example. ("Not only did the prostitute just lie there; it was over in 90 seconds.") This is rich territory for mining Allen the Jew. VH also refers to "the feminist critique of Woody Allen" (p. 93, note 52) without letting us know what that critique is. Further, VH's definite description here is wrong; there are many kinds of feminism and not all feminists dislike or criticize Allen. Nor do all Jews or all feminists object to Philip Roth. At any rate, when VH does attempt to engage Allen the Jew, we get conflicting messages:

[T]he Woody persona [in Allen's films] fears success and happiness . . . because that would make him like the others, and even if he longs for happiness and integration, he knows that it would destroy his peculiar identity (which in its refusal to blend in with the environment is profoundly Jewish and, paradoxically in the case of Allen, culminates in the rejection of a traditional Jewish identity). [p. 44]

[M]uch of the *vis comica* of the Woody persona stems from the problems encountered by a man rooted more profoundly than he would like to admit in traditional Jewish values. [p. 87]

To avoid the possible contradiction between the "rejection" of a Jewish identity and "rooted . . . profoundly" in Jewish values, we could rely on the difference between "identity" and "values" or we could rely on the difference between the Woody persona and Woody Allen. "Paradoxically" is meant to alert us to an important way the Woody persona deviates from the "real" Woody Allen. I do not think either move is satisfactory. The first is trivial; the second is *ad hoc* and (as VH does throughout the



book) exaggerates the difference between Allen's film personae and the "real" Allen. Conflicting messages occur frequently in the book. Here's another example:

Allen's type of comedy is markedly different from the New Comedy that developed in Hellenism. . . . It is much closer to [the Old Comedy of] Aristophanes. . . . Allen is closer to the New than to the Old Comedy. . . . [p. 84, p. 86; see also p. 7]

With time, diligence, coffee, cigarettes, and jelly beans, I could probably figure it out. If not, I could always go to a flick for a couple of hours of brainless refreshment from my profoundly philosophical or exegetical thinking.

Two points are worth mentioning here, even if they have been mentioned before, by greater and quicker minds than mine. Allen might be a wonderful writer and director of movies; he might be a comic of the rank of Aristophanes; he might have superbly probed philosophy and the human condition. Still, when push comes to shove, I reject admiring Allen for the purported depth of his vision. Allen makes us laugh, which is a laudable skill. But after viewing *The Devil's Arithmetic*, *Sophie's Choice*, *Schindler's List*, and (perhaps) *The Sorrow and the Pity*, I look back on Allen's films as a bunch of tiny, insignificant, superficial jokes. So I wonder why in the world any authors would bother to write books (and more books) about Allen. VH says about the Holocaust *only* that "the Jewish form of intellectuality, so monstrosly decimated in Europe, survived in the United States" (p. 87). Why did not VH continue with "and that U.S. Jewish intellectuality, especially in the hands of Allen" (as opposed, say, to Philip Roth), "is small consolation and an ineffective palliative"? Were Allen to make a movie on the Holocaust, would it be the totally serious sort of investigation of the human-cum-Jewish condition that would allow us all to find good seats? Maybe it would be, instead, full of slapstick, parody, and amusing ironies – a *Play It Again, Adolf*, which would complement Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* – thereby turning the Holocaust into a Manhattan cocktail party or a mishpucka Pesach dinner.<sup>5</sup> ("Frankenhole," a series in the Cartoon Network's Adult Swim "program block," in 2010 included an episode "Heal Hitler," in which Das Führer wants his brain surgically fixed to eliminate the portion that causes him to hate Jews. This Frankenhole episode was aired, even though a Frankenhole episode on Mother Teresa was censored.)<sup>6</sup>

Second, there is something eerily the same about Diane Keaton and Mia Farrow. I've seen Keaton in *Annie Hall* a dozen times, and I've seen Farrow in a few of Allen's films. I am struck by the similarity in the mannerisms, including bodily motions and linguistic style, of Keaton and Farrow. Is this similarity due to the precision of Allen's directing, molding both women to mimic accurately the other's cinematic persona? Or does the similarity reflect a genuine personality affinity, so that we see the real women

in the movies and not merely their staged personae? Of course we see both. But does the distinction between the real women and their personae fall apart in this particular aspect? Allen knows better than I do whether we have here a case of Freud's repetition compulsion in his personal life, moving from one lover to another, similar lover. I know better than Allen does that my second wife was as bad as my first wife, and for the same reasons.

VH tells us that he calls "the comic hero played by Woody Allen the Woody persona – to distinguish him from the real human being" (p. 4), batting not one self-referential eyelash over his literal use of "real." Yet in a note to this sentence (p. 89, note 2), VH reports that Diane Jacobs had already distinguished "the Woody persona, Allen (Woody Allen the creator), and Mr. Allen, the famous and wealthy man." VH does not reject her view. Does this mean that there are two "real" Woody Allens, the creator and the wealthy man? Or does it mean that there are two Woody personae, the ordinary film-bound Woody persona (for example, Alvy in *Annie Hall*) and Allen the creator? Or is Allen the wealthy man the second persona? There is some truth in the (postmodernist) claim that we are always impersonating someone even *to ourselves*, when, for example, taking a relaxing bath in a quiet house. We are well on our way to the view that there is no real Woody Allen but only a bunch of Woody Allen personae held together by . . . what? He would not like the answer: his immortal Cartesian ego.

Consider the scene in *Annie Hall* in which Marshall McLuhan steps into the movie theatre lobby and chides the obnoxiously loquacious academic. Allen (as Alvy) addresses the audience aside, speaking (in pretense) from out of the screen to we film viewers in our seats: "Boy, if life were only like this." VH remarks: "The scene is fascinating [in part] because it breaks through the illusion the artwork creates" (p. 41). I take VH to mean (in part) that the illusion (deception) involved in Woody Allen's pretending to be Alvy, that is, Allen's taking on the Alvy persona and submerging his own real person, is briefly suspended. This is suggested by VH's "breaks through the illusion." No. The most we are entitled to say (because the so-called "breaking through" occurs in the film) is that we dealing with *two* personae, the Woody-Alvy persona in the film and the Woody persona who speaks aside to the audience. It makes no sense to say, as VH says, that the film's illusion has been suspended. (The Allen who created *Purple Rose of Cairo* agrees with me; the illusion is broken only if the persona exits the film altogether, ending up in the real theater.) Instead, one illusion has been replaced by another illusion. We could even say that we have here only one seamless, more complex illusion. After all, Allen (the persona Alvy) was speaking to viewers in their seats even before McLuhan popped up, that is, throughout all the events that had already transpired in the film before this scene. All that earlier deception or illusion was Allen's pretending *not* to be speaking (impossibly) to the audience in their seats.

§4. The obvious absence of philosophy in most flicks, which medium astounds us nowadays by incredible special effects that portray explosions and violence in realistic, intricate detail, almost always guarantees the brainless refreshment I was seeking a few paragraphs above. Even these superficial films, *if we actively allow them*, stimulate thoughts about philosophical problems, but only that. They need not be profound to stimulate us; that, too, is one of our roles as viewers, to take or make a cue while watching a matinée. Hence, I offer a more extreme thesis, one that confronts VH in his own ball park. Films, comedy or drama, are rarely if ever “philosophically profound” in themselves. I would not be impressed were professors of film studies to drop names here such as Akira Kurosawa, Lina Wertmüller, Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, and François Truffaut. The latter’s *Fahrenheit 451* is terrible, a crime against Ray Bradbury’s book, nearly killing off internal material from which we might have extracted some philosophical cues, while Quentin Tarantino’s 1994 *Pulp Fiction* and Troy Duffy’s 1999 *Boondock Saints* offer more meat on the bone, that is, allow viewers, those who get excited when hints of philosophical themes make an appearance in a movie, to create and then develop the appropriate cues from the film’s raw scenes and raw dialogue, its “brute facts.”

Television programs are quick bytes, lasting around 25 or 50 minutes, which is not much time for spewing profoundly philosophical cues. Rod Serling’s *Twilight Zone* was the antidote to *Leave It to Beaver*, but a determined couch potato could turn a father-son scene from *Beaver* into a searching examination of the body politic or a domestic quarrel between Ray Romano and his wife Deborah in *Everybody Loves Raymond* into an occasion for discussing recent twists in the sex-gender wars. Episodes of *Law and Order* frequently state opposing philosophical positions without digging deeply into their differences. Most of these difficult, audience-grabbing (because sensational or notorious) legal and moral questions have to do with unsolvable dilemmas that arise in the conflict between utilitarianism and its nemesis, deontology, even if the technical vocabulary is not inserted into the script. The question of priority between the Right and the Good is left unanswered, or the answer changes from one episode to the next. The inquiry never gets any more illuminating than a Larry King interview, although the sarcastic lines put into the mouth of Jerry Orbach as Detective Lennie Briscoe, after he finds a dead body, are priceless. (I was surprised to discover the *Law and Order* personnel who played roles in Allen’s films. Go ahead, Google.)

We might analogize movies to novels and TV programs to novellas and short stories, thereby suggesting that it is the length of the screenplay that allows a film to be philosophical in ways that TV programs cannot be. No. Film does not do that much better with 90 to 150 minutes of foreboding glances, enigmatic dialogue, arcane allusions, and multicontinental landscapes. By contrast, consider the profound philosophical thinking you have to do over the weeks, months, or years required to get

through and comprehend, say, a serious work by Kripke or Heidegger or Rawls or Marx. I can lecture continuously for 90 minutes and barely scratch the surface of a philosophical topic, and it's not my fault. Why anyone other than film studies' personnel, movie makers, and the editorial board of *Film & Philosophy* would claim that films are profoundly philosophical is, for me, a mystery. Movies can provoke philosophical thought or thought about philosophical issues, but they cannot *do* philosophy. A film version of Plato's *Symposium* would be a film that is thoroughly philosophical but, as Morris suggests, it would have no audience at all. (I'd like to try writing the screenplay for Thomas Hobbes's State of Nature or Rawls's Original Position.) Further, having the ability to provoke thought about humankind's central questions about itself is hardly unique to film, and there's no reason to think that film as a medium has more power to provoke this kind of thought than musical lyrics, the written word, puppet shows, and the plastic arts. Journals such as *Film & Philosophy* and *Philosophy and Literature* are honest only if they promote the philosophical study of film and literature; they are bogus to the extent that they purport to find solid and intricate philosophy elsewhere than in the books written by the stars of our field. Passages from *Brothers Karamazov* raise philosophical questions, to be sure, as do passages from Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and collections of *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strips, or almost any other book you randomly pick up. The limit to and source of philosophical provocation is your own curiosity and intelligence. Almost the whole of *Crime and Punishment* can be seen as a philosophical treatise; but that it can be seen as such a thing does not make it such a thing. Dostoyevsky was not a philosopher (nor was Camus); his examination of philosophical issues is less deep than *Philosophy for Dummies* and certainly less well organized. What we learn from Sartre's plays is that drama and novels can at best provide, by their natures, examples of philosophical views, themes, and people. Alas, this is the fate also of Woody Allen. As VH reminds us, many of the "germs" of the ideas expressed in his films appeared in his slim volumes *Getting Even*, *Without Feathers*, and *Side Effects*. Allen's films do not go any deeper into the philosophical issues raised or alluded to in these comical writings. All the films do is to give voices and bodies to the ideas and to tell stories about the people who think along the lines of (or deny) his satiric view of life and philosophy. VH discusses at length Allen's *Annie Hall*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. That choice says a lot about the philosophical profundity of Allen's films. The philosophical messages or slogans that emerge from three of his films (arguably the most important films in understanding Allen's vision) are not profound; and to the extent that these films are profound, that has nothing to do with their being comedies. The "whole point" or punch line of these films can be summed up briefly. I'll do that later in §8 (I alluded to it in §1). In the meantime, don't get me started on *Kindle* and how it makes my multicolored Pilots obsolete.

§5. We learn from Morris's foreword (p. x) to *Woody Allen and Philosophy* and his biographical sketch (p. 263) that he taught philosophy at Notre Dame for fifteen years and showed clips from Allen's films in his "most popular classes" at that university. Some American Catholics do appreciate Allen, and even if Woody is an atheist, he's too lovable for believing Catholics to take him seriously. Nor does Allen get in your face in the brash manner of Madalyn Murray O'Hair. The fact that Morris, an Allen scholar, and VH, another Allen scholar, both taught at Notre Dame provoked me to investigate links between them. What I quickly found out is that they were not at Notre Dame at the same time, Morris leaving in 1996<sup>7</sup> and VH arriving later, in 1999. Who taught philosophy using clips from Allen's movies after Morris left? Did VH pick up the slack? Included in the list of 27 courses VH has taught at Notre Dame (see pp. 31-32 of the printed English version of his *curriculum vitae*)<sup>8</sup> is "Theory of Comedy." I couldn't uncover the syllabus or the date(s) the course was offered – a dead end. But other investigations turned up interesting connections, or lack of them, between VH and other scholars who have studied and written about Woody Allen and his films.

I counted, in the "Notes" (the book contains no bibliography), ten books about Woody Allen to which VH refers, four from the 1980s and six from the 1990s. (That at least ten books about Woody Allen existed before the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is, for me, amazing.) VH's showing in his book an acquaintance with the literature in this cottage industry perhaps explains why Ian Jarvie judges that VH "has an impressive command of Allen's work, including the short stories and secondary literature."<sup>9</sup> The first version of VH's book on Allen was published in the journal *Film & Philosophy* (vol. 5, Dec. 2000), an issue devoted to Woody Allen and edited by Sander Lee. Since that time, in 2004, the Conard-Skoble collection was published. Three years later, VH brought out this expanded revision of his *Film & Philosophy* essay (originally entitled "Why Do We Laugh at and with Woody Allen?"). What is hard to understand, if VH has mastered the secondary literature and is a scrupulous scholar, is that VH (with minor exceptions) ignored the other essays from the *Film & Philosophy* Woody Allen issue and the essays in the Conard-Skoble volume. This pattern is odd in itself, but especially because one of the most frequently referred to films in VH's book is *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (see the film index, pp. 95-96), out of the eleven essays in *Film & Philosophy*, five (!) are on *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, and in the Conard-Skoble collection, the most frequently referred to films are *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Annie Hall* (see Index, p. 265).<sup>10</sup> None of the mentions of Arthur Schopenhauer and Henri Bergson that occurs in Conard-Skoble, the two philosophical stars of VH's book, is noted by VH. By ignoring both *Film & Philosophy* and Conard-Skoble, VH writes in a near vacuum of his own creation, isolating himself in a protective sterile bubble. In the Conard-Skoble volume, 43 rather than 41 Allen films are listed in the "Filmography" (pp. 259-260). One film not included in VH's Index is the 1998 cartoon *Antz*; the other is the 2004 *Melinda and Melinda*. I do not mind that VH did not revise the original essay to squeeze in some

commentary on the 2004 movie, but I do mind that the revision does not acknowledge the 2004 Conard-Skoble collection. Maybe VH's failure to recognize other scholars in his community partially explains why no one I know knows of VH (of course I know myself), despite the thirty-nine pages of his stupendous *curriculum vitae*. What goes around comes around. Not one contributing author in the 2004 Conard-Skoble volume refers to VH's essay as it first appeared in the 2000 *Film & Philosophy* issue. A gushing account of VH's accomplishments in *Notre Dame Magazine* says both that VH is "a world-renowned philosopher" and "in U.S. academic circles he is not yet widely known,"<sup>11</sup> failing to eliminate the contradiction. There is another reason I've never heard of VH. He has written around thirty scholarly books, but only eight have been or will be published in the U.S. (in English), and all eight are on "the list" of his home institution, the University of Notre Dame Press. (I know this jargon from hearing from publishers that they have no room, unfortunately, on their list for my book. C'mon, it's not rocket science. Click on "Page Layout" and "Margins," and we're all set.)

§6. The brevity of this book is counterbalanced not by concise profundity (or concise Allenian witticisms) but by illogically long, run-on paragraphs – which is partly why I judged the book to be "rambling." One paragraph, for example, goes from the middle of page 38 to the top few lines of page 41; another paragraph stretches from the middle of page 77 to the end of page 79; and another starts at the bottom third of page 9 and ends with a few lines at the top of page 12. The green Pilot pen remarked, "Why such long paragraphs?" It also calculated 1.3 pages/paragraph. Germans write long sentences, to be sure, and VH is no exception, but long sentences need not be transmogrified into long paragraphs, if the German in question is writing an essay in English. However, we should not ask why this book is made up of *so few* paragraphs, but why *so damn many*? Why are we readers forced to disrupt our trains of thought, in a kind of *coitus interruptus*, by the author's thoughtlessly inserting paragraph breaks? Having included several paragraphs, with either the grudging or supportive permission of a UND Press copyeditor, that are 2½ pages long, it would not have been a radical extension to have turned this short book into one fat and flowing stream-of-consciousness paragraph.

In his review of VH's book, John Morreall (see note 4) accuses VH of being pedantic. "The tendency toward pedantry shows up . . . in some of Hösle's writing, as in the redundant "indispensable prerequisite" (p. 4), "too overopinionated" (p. 66), and "appearance of a deus ex machina from above" (p. 54). These phrases do not strike me as cases of pedantry. I believe that the main sense of "pedant" is "a person who makes an excessive or inappropriate display of learning."<sup>12</sup> VH uses "pedantry" properly: "Allen here is making fun of professors' pedantry" (p. 39), as Allen does with respect to the loud-mouthed professor in *Annie Hall* who lets everyone in the movie theater lobby know that he teaches a course on Marshall McLuhan (p. 41). If Morreall inaccurately uses "pedantic" to describe those three phrases in VH's book, then what

would an accurate description be? I think the repetitive awkwardness of the phrases is a symptom of the fact that English is not VH's native language. The awkwardly-written sentences, the conflicting messages, the rambling and run-on paragraphs, the inelegant phrases, and the frequency with which VH uses the word "profound," thereby diluting its power and making it empty<sup>13</sup> – these are evidence that VH has not mastered (American) English. It is ironic, then, that we find out from his *curriculum vitae* (p. 39), and which is repeated in the article about him in *Notre Dame Magazine*, that VH (trying vainly to outdo Yale's late John Boswell) has "Active knowledge of German, Italian, English, Spanish, Russian, Norwegian, and French; passive knowledge of Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, Pali, Avestan, Portuguese, Catalan, Modern Greek, Swedish, and Danish." The linguistic infelicities in VH's book are all the more perplexing because his "friend Mark Roche" suggested "linguistic and substantive improvements" to the 2000 *Film & Philosophy* version of the book (p. ix) and the 2000 *Film & Philosophy* essay was copyedited while it slouched toward its reincarnated 2007 publication (p. x). VH needs to be advised that some of the wording in the English version of his *curriculum vitae* is wrong. On the first page, VH provides as his "Current Address" his department and office address and, as his "Permanent Address," he gives his home address. Why not simply the accurate "Office" and "Home" addresses and contact information? "Current Address" is wrongly applied to his office, for VH is by now well-entrenched at Notre Dame and his office address has more claim to permanency than his home address, which may well change if the Hösle family comes across a more comfortable house in which to live. I'm not being pedantic. I'm quibbling.

Still, who is the real VH, the one at the Current Address (the professor in his office and on the classroom stage, lecturing with pizzazz) or the one at his Permanent Address (the quiet husband and father)? Which one is the pretended persona: the face VH shows to his loved ones or the face he shows to his colleagues and students? Which face does his friend Mark Roche see, the person or the persona (or both)? How can we tell the difference? If the real VH is the one who lives at his Permanent Address, his family and his real life are given short shrift in his 39-page *curriculum vitae*, occupying three lines at the very end under "Personal." But maybe the VH persona is the one who interacts with VH's real family. Now we have to admit into our ontology a fourth Woody Allen, the one left over when we subtract Allen the Woody personae, Allen the creator, and Allen the wealthy man: the "personal" Allen. Which one or combination did Soon Yi Previn marry in 1997? Did she know that she was marrying *that* one? Philosophers will warn us that we cannot substitute *salve veritate* one face for another in intentional contexts.

§7. Masturbation is sex with someone I love, and I don't have to worry about finding a cab home at 3 in the morning. Masturbation is sex with someone I love, so I don't have to primp. How do you expect me to answer "To be or not to be?" when I haven't made

any progress on “To cheat or not to cheat?” How do you expect me to fathom “To cheat or not to cheat?” when I haven’t yet solved “To kiss or not to kiss?” There’s nothing that gives us a scent of the spiritual or an intimation of the presence of the divine as well as those magnificent medieval paintings of the suffering of Christ and Monday Night Football. “Sex is one of the most beautiful, natural, wholesome things that money can buy.”<sup>14</sup> The male author of a magazine article about women says that they are “the keepers of the life-tides.” I think that’s silly. I can just see my wife Gloria trying to keep a life-tide when she doesn’t even know where she put her car keys.<sup>15</sup>

Did you read these as (good or bad) jokes? Of course. But given the right context, they could have been received as seriously as the lecture on speeding you hear from the cop who stopped you. Stewie Griffin in *Family Guy* might ask, “How do you expect me to fathom ‘To cheat or not to cheat?’ when I haven’t yet solved ‘To kiss or not to kiss?’” Depending on how he says it and to whom, it can be a funny exaggeration or a solemn lament. I cannot imagine most Woody Allen personae saying it with a straight face; perhaps the “personal” Allen could do it.

Whether a bunch of words are funny or serious depends, as VH recognizes (p. 24), on its context. Here are two examples from those I have gathered over the years. “Care has been taken not only that the trees should not sweep the stars down, but also that every man who admires a fair girl should not be enamoured of her”<sup>16</sup> If we read this passage in a way unintended by its author, it might sound much like Allen’s “Not only is there no God, but try getting a plumber on weekends.”<sup>17</sup> About existentialism, the Polish author Witold Gombrowicz wrote: “It seems impossible to meet the demands of *Dasein* and simultaneously have coffee and croissants for an evening snack. To fear nothingness, but to fear the dentist more. To be consciousness, which walks around in pants and talks on the telephone. To be responsibility, which runs little shopping errands downtown. To bear the weight of significant being, to install the world with meaning and then return the change from ten pesos.”<sup>18</sup> If I didn’t know from the context that this criticism of Jean-Paul Sartre was meant seriously, I could easily have imagined that Gombrowicz was adding his own beautiful jokes to the aphorisms at the end of Allen’s “My Philosophy.”<sup>19</sup>

One more example makes the point in reverse. In this passage, VH is discussing a scene in Allen’s *Manhattan*:

Ike says to his seventeen-year-old girlfriend Tracy: “I don’t believe in extramarital relationships. I think people should mate for life, like pigeons and Catholics.” This remark is witty in a Schopenhauerian way because it brings two very different things, pigeons and Catholics, under one general concept, monogamous behavior. But it is easy to see that other factors add to its comic



effect. By introducing “pigeons” between “people” and “Catholics,” the remark surreptitiously diminishes the value of the behavior praised; for one can hardly regard animals as models, and to compare pigeons with Catholics is clearly disparaging to the latter. [pp. 17-18]

VH the philosopher of humor (as opposed to VH as a devout Catholic or VH as a historian of theology) finds this talk of pigeons, humans, and monogamy charmingly funny. But VH misses Allen’s philosophical allusion and, as a result, misses an opportunity to illustrate his claim that context often divides the funny from the solemn. For St. Thomas Aquinas found the analogy between birds (generic) and humans with respect to monogamy to be both appropriate and illuminating, not amusing.<sup>20</sup> The source of the humor, for those who know both their Allen and their Aquinas, is that Ike chose the unlikely pigeon, one of the Manhattanite’s deadly enemies, as the exemplar of birds.

§8. In the episode “Empire” of *Law and Order*, a conniving upwardly mobile character played by Julia Roberts tells a police detective, a married man who has repeatedly and emphatically turned down her sexual invitations, that in a hundred years she, he, his wife, their children, their friends, and countless others, will be nothing but scattered dust and absolutely no one will care who slept with whom (yes, she said “whom”).<sup>21</sup> She assumed the worst, the most dismal atheistic scenario, and concluded from this that we may as well violate, if not jettison altogether, the rigorous promises and duties of matrimony and, like some mammals (not pigeons), rut in any hedonistic gutter of our own choosing. I just completed an exercise in Critical Reasoning by linguistically slanting her view to make it sound contemptible. Otherwise, I nearly laid out the heart and soul of Woody Allen’s philosophy. Nothing profound here.

Mickey, the Woody persona in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), is plagued by a question: Why should we care about anything, what difference does it make what we do and think, if there is no God, no objective moral structure, no life after this one? Cecilia, in *Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), poses roughly the same problem: If there’s no God, the play (drama) of life would not be meaningful and, to boot, it would have no happy ending.<sup>22</sup> And Ben the Rabbi declares in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) that if there weren’t a meaningful moral structure and a forgiving higher power, there would be no basis on which to live. In these three Allen movies, a similar and important question is raised. It is answered in only one of the films, with a Jewish version of Julia Robert’s philosophy. Mickey eventually says to himself: OK, let’s assume the worst, that there is no God and we have only one life. It does not follow that life is not worth living. We can still enjoy life while we have it, which is valuable and something to look forward to. *L’Chaim*.

I said earlier that VH's interpretation is not quite right: "Mickey in *Hannah and Her Sisters* is saved from his suicidal intentions, connected with his incapacity to find out whether God really exists, by the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*, which does not solve his theological problem but shows that it is not necessary to do so in order to enjoy life" (p. 79). To my mind, there is a difference between assuming the worst, that there is no God, and not being able to solve that philosophical puzzle.<sup>23</sup> There's also a difference between its not being necessary to decide whether God exists in order to enjoy life, and promoting the enjoyment of life as the only thing we have if there is no God. Ian Jarvie, in my view, gets it right: "Allen offers a simple philosophy of life: enjoy it whilst you can, remembering that it doesn't last long."<sup>24</sup> This answer works well enough for Mickey in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, but all it does is give us a lollipop to suck on until we realize that it's a non-answer, or not a general answer to the problem. It is an answer that might be arrived at by a satisfied and doing-well-enough Jewish Manhattanite, a member of the economically fluid and solid middle-class intelligentsia. To remind or proselytize to starving third-world children that they should "enjoy life" is cruel. There is nothing in the answer "Assume the Worst. Nevertheless, *L'Chaim*" that yields an objective moral structure demanding that the haves alleviate the suffering of the have nots.

A variation on this answer (which I mentioned in §3) comes from *Annie Hall*, spoken by Woody's Alvy persona. After telling a joke – Two elderly women are at a Catskill resort. One says, "The food at this place is really terrible." The other one replies, "I know; and such small portions" – Alvy remarks: "that's essentially how I feel about life – full of loneliness, and misery, and suffering, and unhappiness, and it's all over much too quickly." This is equivalent to Jarvie's "enjoy it whilst you can" only if we remember Allen's debt to Freud: As long as you are *only* full of loneliness, misery, suffering, and unhappiness, then you are experiencing the ordinary, par-for-the-course, bearable sadness of life. This ordinary sadness in fact constitutes your happiness, that you are not experiencing anything worse than loneliness, misery, suffering, and unhappiness. This realization must or should make you happy. A life that is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short is better than a life that is less than short. It is an occasion for rejoicing. Again, none of this philosophy protects the homeless in Bucharest and in Allen's own Manhattan. That's why I like *Law and Order*.

§9. Those who can't, teach. Those who can't teach, teach gym. And those who can't teach gym, teach film studies.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Chicago and La Salle, Ill.: Open Court.

<sup>2</sup>Respectively: *Hannah and Her Sisters*; *Manhattan*; *Crimes and Misdemeanors*; *Getting Even* (New York: Vintage, 1978), p. 22 (“Critique of Pure Dread” in “My Philosophy”); *Annie Hall*.

<sup>3</sup>“Despite critical acclaim, [Bergman’s] films rarely earned large grosses or gained wide audiences” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ingmar\\_bergman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ingmar_bergman)). Bergman understood the human condition but not human humor.

<sup>4</sup>John Morreall, review of VH’s book, in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=107442007.08.15>.

<sup>5</sup>See, however, Allen’s “The Schmeed Memoirs,” in *Getting Even*, pp. 15-20.

<sup>6</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Shelley's\\_Frankenhole](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Shelley's_Frankenhole).

<sup>7</sup>Personal correspondence with Tom Morris, May 15, 2011.

<sup>8</sup>Accessible by a link on VH’s home page, <http://nd.edu/~vhosle/>.

<sup>9</sup>In a review of VH’s book on Allen, in *Philosophy in Review* 28, #1 (2008), pp. 27-28, at p. 27.

<sup>10</sup>The minor exceptions: (1) VH does not refer to Sander Lee’s essay, on *Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy*, in the Conard-Skoble collection, although he does refer (p. 89, note 6) to Lee’s 1997 book, *Woody Allen’s Angst*. In a note on the last page of his Conard-Skoble essay (p. 185, note 23), Lee writes, “This essay is a modified version of a chapter that appeared in *Woody Allen’s Angst*.” VH cites Lee’s entire book, without specific page numbers, so we don’t know whether VH’s reading this revision would have done him any good. However, we do know that *Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy* is one of the three films most frequently mentioned by VH. (2) VH does not refer to Mary Nichols’s essay in the Conard-Skoble volume, although he does refer (p. 91, note 16) to her 1998 book, *Reconstructing Woody*. Her essay in Conard-Skoble was not taken from or based on that book. (3) VH does not refer to Maurice Yacowar’s essay in *Film & Philosophy*, although he does refer (p. 89, note 1) to Yacowar’s 1991 book on Allen, *Loser Take All*. Might Yacowar’s essay, written almost ten years later, be important? (4) VH does not refer to Mark Roche’s essay, “Justice and the Withdrawal of God in Woody Allen’s *Crimes and Misdemeanors*,” in *Film & Philosophy*, although he does refer (p. 94, note 83) to that essay as it appeared five years earlier in the light-weight *Journal of Value Inquiry* (29 [1995], pp. 547-563). Roche’s contribution to *Film & Philosophy* is an “expanded version” of that earlier essay (see his *curriculum vitae*: [http://mroche.nd.edu/assets/11410/cv\\_roche\\_web.pdf](http://mroche.nd.edu/assets/11410/cv_roche_web.pdf)). Why does VH not cite the more recent and, presumably, improved version?

<sup>11</sup>John Monczunski, "The Amazing World of Vittorio Hösle," *Notre Dame Magazine*, Spring 2007 ([http://magazine.nd.edu/news/9885-the-amazing-world-of-vittorio-hsle/\[sic\]](http://magazine.nd.edu/news/9885-the-amazing-world-of-vittorio-hsle/[sic])). This chatty article is based on VH's *curriculum vitae* (see note 8, above). The account of VH in *Wikipedia* is similar; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vittorio\\_Hösle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vittorio_Hösle).

<sup>12</sup><http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/pedant>.

<sup>13</sup>The promiscuous "profound" can be found on pages x, 6, 7, 17, 26, 34, 44, 60, 75, 76, 81, 87, and 93n47. *Everything You Wanted to Know about Profundity but Were Afraid to Ask*.

<sup>14</sup>Attributed to an undisambiguated "Tom Clancy" on the web site <http://www.funnyandjokes.com/top-10-most-famous-sex-quotes.html>.

<sup>15</sup>Truncated, modified, and paraphrased from E. B. White, "Getting Along with Women," *Quo Vadimus? Or the Case for the Bicycle*. Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Pub. Co., 1946 reprint, pp. 110-117, at p. 111 (from *The New Yorker*, December 7, 1935).

<sup>16</sup>George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*. New York: New American Library, 1979, p. 85.

<sup>17</sup>*Getting Even*, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup>The snippet of newspaper I saved is from the *New York Review of Books*, January 12, 2006. The passage can be found at [http://ericwargo.com/gombrowicz/?page\\_id=20](http://ericwargo.com/gombrowicz/?page_id=20) and [http://www.gyford.com/phil/writing/2006/05/04/new\\_york\\_review.php](http://www.gyford.com/phil/writing/2006/05/04/new_york_review.php).

<sup>19</sup>*Getting Even*, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup>See *Summa contra gentiles*, III/2: 122.8, 123.2; and *Summa theologiae*, II-II: 154.2.

<sup>21</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Law\\_&\\_Order\\_episodes\\_\(season\\_9\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Law_&_Order_episodes_(season_9)); the episode first aired on May 5, 1999.

<sup>22</sup>See Mark Conard, "God, Suicide, and the Meaning of Life," in Conard-Skoble, pp. 14-15.

<sup>23</sup>Allen is closer to Richard Dawkins: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ariane\\_Sherine\\_and\\_Richard\\_Dawkins\\_at\\_the\\_Atheist\\_Bus\\_Campaign\\_launch.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ariane_Sherine_and_Richard_Dawkins_at_the_Atheist_Bus_Campaign_launch.jpg), which captures Dawkins and a hottie supporter.

<sup>24</sup>"Review," p. 28 (see note 9, above).

<sup>25</sup>See my "The Mainstream Has Always Been Pornographic," *Bridges*, no. 12 (October-November, 2004), pp. 33-36.